

Lawmaker says Bush, Hastert Dragging on Assault Weapons Ban

July 19, 2004 Monday

Mike Ramsey - Copley News Service

The clock is ticking for the national ban on military-style assault weapons, U.S. Rep. Jan **Schakowsky** warned Monday as she criticized top Republicans on the issue.

The Evanston Democrat and representatives from two police organizations urged Congress to renew the 10-year prohibition on certain types of semiautomatic guns, which expires Sept. 13, and tighten loopholes in the law. **Schakowsky** said President George W. Bush, a Republican, and U.S. Speaker Dennis Hastert, R-Yorkville, are dragging their feet so they don't offend gun-rights advocates in an election year.

"If you're a criminal or a street 'terrorist,' you can mark Sept. 13, 2004, on your Day Planner," **Schakowsky** said at a news conference in Chicago. "That's the day the assault-weapon ban expires, and on that day you can get your hands on an AK-47 legally."

The American manufacture of 19 models of semiautomatic weapons, such as AK-47s and MAC-10s, has been outlawed since 1994, although gun makers have produced similar versions that skirt the law's specifications. Assault weapons can be discharged rapid fire.

"They're not hunting weapons - there's no legitimate purpose for these weapons other than to kill other human beings," said Gurnee Police Chief Robert Jones, the first vice president of the Illinois Association of Chiefs of Police.

Hastert's press office did not return messages left Monday. Bush, who's running for re-election in November, has said he supports an extension of the assault-weapons ban but hasn't actively lobbied for the measure. It faces opposition from the powerful National Rifle Association.

"The president talked about the issue in 2000. He's made his position clear, and it's well-known and it hasn't changed," Jim Morrell, a White House spokesman, said.

Richard Pearson, executive director of the Illinois State Rifle Association, said the weapons targeted by the law aren't prevalent in crime. And he said some sportsmen do, in fact, use them

to hunt animals.

"The point is, they're trying to take the firearms away from legitimate citizens," Pearson said.

The Illinois Council Against Handgun Violence on Monday released a list of 111 police and sheriff's departments across the state that support extending the ban. They responded to a letter the council sent last month, but Jones said all law-enforcement agencies would favor the measure.

Litchfield Police Chief B.J. Wilkinson backs the ban, even though his jurisdiction near Springfield hasn't been plagued by violence from assault weapons. He said he foresees gang and other criminal activity spreading to rural areas.

"We know the bad elements are out there, and we know we're going to have to fight them sooner or later," Wilkinson said. "It's the law of averages."

Pearson said police chiefs are "political appointees" who don't represent rank-and-file officers.

The federal government has long banned fully automatic weapons.